Robert Ray
Earns
Master Model Railroader® #761

I grew up in the Irvington district of Fremont, California. My best childhood memories were of both model and prototype trains. I spent many summer days exploring the remnants of Western Pacific and Southern Pacific structures along the tracks at the end of Blacow Road. An old boarded-up freight depot was our fort, accessed through a floor hatch. It was fully furnished with chairs, a desk where we kept pencils and crayons, an old freight scale on which we weighed ourselves, and an old-time icebox we kept full of Cokes.

We would draw and color until the trains came through, at which point all of us kids would crawl out and watch the trains barrel by. Many of the trains going through carried cars from either the Ford plant in Milpitas or the GM plant in Fremont, and we could see all the car colors through the open autoracks.

I had a Lionel train set under my bed at home, and I would run it while lying on the floor, pretending to be riding the train and looking out the windows. By the time I was a teen, I had built a 4x8-foot HO scale layout in the garage that had some store-bought foam mountains, as well as mountains and tunnels I made from canvas strips dipped in white glue and sprinkled with dyed sawdust for grass. Houses were built from toothpicks and coffee stirrers, and I had some LifeLike kits and trees. My mom worked in electronics and would bring home assorted LEDs, grain-of-rice bulbs, and other miniature electronics, so I made mini light-up interiors and signs on my buildings. It was wonderful.

After high school, I entered the semiconductor industry, where I stayed for a 40-year career. When I bought my first home in 1982, I built an N-scale layout in the garage. N-scale was becoming popular with young modelers, and it was an exciting time to be in N, as it seemed that whatever model you scratchbuilt or kitbashed, you were the first person who ever did it in N. I modeled N-scale for the next 20 years until the dot-com bubble burst, and the U.S. semiconductor industry looked to be dying. I created a website at http://raybob.boche.net/, where I could share my modeling journey with anyone interested, and even though it has not been updated in decades, it is still up today.

Finding myself out of work, I decided to start a home business until I could

land a suitable job in my field. In 2003, I purchased a professional 35W CO2 laser engraver. I started cutting architectural models, but business was slow, so I switched gears and decided to make laser kits to sell to hobby shops. I created a line of HO- and N-scale wooden caboose kits. The N-scale kits really took off, and I continued producing them for a few more years. Meanwhile, I received a call from my laser seller, notifying me of a new 1.5-inch focus lens that would allow even finer results with my laser, so I made a caboose kit for Z-scale. Once I posted photos on the internet, I was contacted by all kinds of Z-scalers asking me to please make it into a kit.

I met several local Z-scale modelers online, and we decided to start a Z-Bend Track modular railroad club, where we ran the trains with wireless NCE DCC. This venue allowed us to show all the new Z-scale models and kits available, and also show the world that Z-scale was a serious modeler's scale. If you can do it in O and HO, you can do it in Z! The club attracted some excellent modelers and electronics gurus. At about that time, Micro-Trains Line and American Z Line started producing Z-scale cars and flywheel-equipped locomotives, forever changing the scope of Z-scale modeling.

Around the same time, I entered Z-scale. I became interested in the NMRA and started taking some Z-scale models to local meets. I attended a clinic by Jack Burgess, who was our local Achievement Program chair, and he explained how model judging was done, how to describe your efforts under each of the five judging categories to get the best scores, and how to back it with plans, drawings, and photos. I scratchbuilt a Northern Pacific 1600-series caboose in Z and took it to a meet where it scored 117 points.

Building a merit-scoring model was a very good feeling, mainly because none of the other modelers in the Region modeled Z Scale. Only one other guy there, Tom Knapp, seemed to appreciate the work required to make a contest-quality model of this size. Tom's work was a true inspiration. I decided one day I wanted to earn my Master Model Railroader® certificate, but I wanted to do the whole process with Z-scale modeling.

I had won some module contests, but I was not participating in the Achievement Program's contests for lack of time. I was too busy building modules for train shows in my spare time and producing a line of Z-scale laser kits, including my kit line and OEM kits for *Ztrack Magazine,* Stonebridge Models, and Micro-Trains Line, from 2008 to 2012.

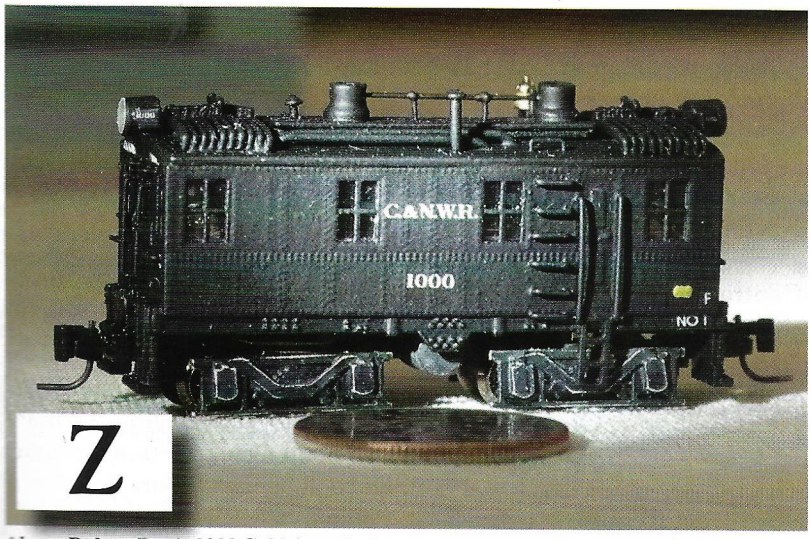
In 2012, I was promoted to Laser Spike Anneal System Specialist at my day job at Ultratech Inc. I no longer had time to produce laser kits, so I stopped all modeling until after my retirement in 2018. After retiring, I moved to the Boise, Idaho, area to be near family and rejoined the NMRA. Having collected books and historical information on the Northern Pacific Railway for decades, I started planning a set of T-TRAK Z modules to feature the ghost town of Lester, Washington, as it appeared in the 1950s.

After dismantling my teenage HO-scale layout in the 1970s, all successive layouts I built were to be modular so I could take them apart for moving. When I started building Z-scale modules, I followed the Z-Bend Track format, but over the years, I found the modules grew too heavy, large, difficult, and painful to set up at shows. I gave all but one of my modules to an active modeler in the Colorado Z Scale Model Railroading Group. This way, the modules could live on, and seeing my old modules running trains at the 2023 NMRA National Train Show in Grapevine, Texas, was very satisfying. I needed lighter and smaller modules to deal with going forward, so I decided to model using the T-TRAK Z format.

I had built hundreds of Z-scale models over the years. I showed some of them to local modelers Clyde Queen, Jr., and Bob Parrish, who told me I had enough models to earn several AP certificates based on what they had seen so far. I started doing the paperwork to support the models and soon earned certificates of achievement. Within a few short years, I built a prototypical representation of the Lester, Washington, yard. Once the modules were completed, I wrote an article for *Ztrack Magazine* with a sufficient page count to add to other articles and website work to earn my Model Railroad - Author certificate.

Prior to earning Author, I earned certificates for Master Builder – Scenery, Structures, Prototype Models, Motive Power, Cars, and Model Railroad Engineer – Electrical. For all the modules built over the years, I had enough square footage for a Golden Spike Award.

What's next? I just finished building a 16x20-foot train shed in my backyard. It's insulated, heated, and cooled, and I am drawing plans for an around-the-room module shelf system with island outcrops. The modular layout is called "Vignettes of the Northern Pacific," as I plan on adding modules representing the stations along the Northern Pacific Railway between Lester and Cle Elum, Washington — not all in the same year, but rather built to the most interesting timeframe of each location based on photos I've seen. Most will be as prototypical as possible, but there will be a fictional town where I can place my ever-growing collection of prototypical 1960s businesses and structures. Look through the Z-scale forum pages of Trainboard.com to see more.



Above: **Robert Ray's 2023 Gold Award winning Z-scale C&NW scratchbuilt boxcab. Yes, that's a dime in front for size! —** ***Paul Voelker photo***

Certificates Earned
Robert Ray, MMR® #761

Master Builder – Scenery
Master Builder – Structures
Master Builder – Prototype Models
Master Builder – Motive Power
Master Builder – Cars
Model Railroad Engineer – Electrical
Model Railroad Author